

Agnes Batory, Sara Svensson

# The fuzzy concept of collaborative governance: A systematic review of the state of the art

**ABSTRACT:** *This article contributes to the consolidation and synthesis of scholarship on collaborative governance by expanding our knowledge of how the term is used in the academic literature and policy documents in a range of European countries. It adds value to the existing reviews of the field by conducting a systematic literature review on a corpus of over 700 article abstracts and a traditional literature review identifying five key analytical dimensions. The article also provides an exploratory analysis of grey literature hitherto outside the purview of researchers and considers the linguistic and cultural connotations that alter the meaning of the term when translated into new contexts in ten EU/EFTA countries. Findings indicate heterogeneity and fuzziness in the way the concept is used. The article argues that explicit positions with respect to five main analytical dimensions and taking into account the national connotations that the term carries across political systems would inject more clarity into the academic discourse. This, in turn, will help policymakers to make informed use of the concept, especially in multi-national policy-making arenas.*

**KEYWORDS:** collaborative governance; systematic literature review; connotations of collaboration

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## INTRODUCTION

Collaborative approaches to policy-making are high on the agenda for most European governments and are key to European Commission activities with respect to the transformation of public administration in the European Union (EU) (Hammerschmid et al., 2016; European Commission, 2016). A long line of politicians has stated the need for government units to overcome organizational cleavages and reach out to citizens and stakeholders in order to address difficult policy problems and deliver public services more efficiently. Collaborative approaches to policy-making have also been advocated as a way to close the seemingly growing gap between government and citizens and thus to alleviate normative problems commonly besetting Western democracies in the last decades. Collaborative governance has received considerable attention from public administration scholars and is the subject of a burgeoning body of academic literature in policy studies, public management and democratic theory. However, the rapid uptake of collaborative governance and related concepts, such as coordination, cooperation, joined-up governance, network governance (e.g., Robinson 2006) and interactive governance (Michels, 2011), led to a rather amorphous, diffused discussion, rather than a coherent narrative. Attempts to structure the debate have so far exclusively focused on the academic literature in English. This article aims to facilitate the synthesis and consolidation of work undertaken so far in a way that is more culturally sensitive and more open to developments taking place in the world of practice.

More specifically, this article first seeks to map the current state of the art. It pinpoints key dimensions of variation in how collaborative governance is defined in the academic literature through a qualitative analysis of influential scholarly work and provides a systematic literature review of a corpus of over 700 article abstracts. The analysis shows that scholarly articles differ in their conceptualisation of collaborative governance along at least five dimensions, which concern the public-private (governmental-non-governmental) divide; agency; organisational aspects; scope and locus within the policy process; and normative assumptions. Second, the paper extends this analysis to incorporate some preliminary findings on relevant 'grey' literature on collaborative governance in Europe – which seems to be in closer touch with developments of high relevance for practice – in order to indicate whether and to what extent the scholarly and the practitioner-oriented literature overlap or differ in orientation and subjects covered. Finally, the paper takes stock of the national connotations of the term in different European languages, which aims to mitigate the Anglo-Saxon bias in the literature. For the second and third objectives, the paper relies on responses from teams of academic public

administration experts in ten EU and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries. The methodological approach for each of these steps is described in the respective sections of the paper. The penultimate section provides a synthesis of the results, including recommendations for reconceptualization and future research.

An important disclaimer is in order. The exercise below is exploratory in nature: our objective was not to establish new causal links or highlight empirical developments but rather to expand our knowledge about the uses (and abuses) of the concept, which we would argue nonetheless lays useful groundwork for theory-building in the future. Our findings highlight that collaborative governance remains a diffuse concept, which needs to be far more precisely used in order to serve scholarship and practitioners better. We suggest that one way to achieve this would be to make explicit the researchers' assumptions with respect to the five analytical dimensions suggested earlier and to take into account the national connotations the term carries across political systems.

## WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE? RESULTS BASED ON A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF INFLUENTIAL ARTICLES

Although 'collaborative governance' is widely used in the academic literature, researchers encounter a bewildering array of concepts that the term is meant to cover. While there are several analytical frameworks, based on literature reviews, that aim to impose some order on the field (e.g., Bryson et al, 2006; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al, 2012; Bingham and O'Leary, 2015), this type of synthesizing work has not been able to keep pace with the rapid growth of literature. For the purposes of this article, stock-taking started with a qualitative analysis of the most influential articles published in English-language academic journals. Narrative reviews of this sort, as opposed to systematic literature reviews, are more suited to interpretation (Geertz, 1993; Tranfield et al, 2003; Bryman, 2008). This was based on a structured analysis of 40 articles – the 20 most cited<sup>1</sup> and 20 recent and relevant.<sup>2</sup> The analysis was also informed by the authors' previous reading of relevant scholarly work.

To sample these publications, the most cited article was published in 2008 by Ansell and Gash in the *Journal of Public Administration*. The article offers a fairly restrictive definition in that it requires participation by non-state actors: 'a governing arrangement where [...] public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders' (Ansell and Gash, 2008: 544). Coordination within government, among government-sector actors is hence excluded. As noted by Ansell and Gash, this should not be controversial, since the popularity of the term 'governance' partly comes from blurring boundaries between the public and private sectors (Stoker, 1998). Importantly, the definition also emphasizes that the government is the primary actor, taking the formal initiative for reaching out to non-governmental actors. This excludes advocacy and lobbying efforts, for instance, where contact is typically initiated by non-governmental actors. It also excludes purely consultative practices.

The definitions by Emerson et al. (2012) and Agranoff and McGuire (2003) leave open what type of actor drives collaborative processes. Emerson et al. (2012: 2) describe collaborative governance as processes and structures of decision-making that involve stakeholders from a variety of sectors and levels 'in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished'. Agranoff and McGuire (2003: 4) similarly stresses the in/tractability of problems in the absence of cooperation when defining collaborative management as a process dealing with 'problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organizations'. Bingham et al. (2005) and Bingham and O'Leary (2015) stress the nexus between the public and private sector, combining the concepts of collaborative public management and participatory governance to describe and explain the increasing volume of public policy processes involving collaboration, with mostly successful outcomes.

This influential body of work can perhaps be seen as representative of US scholarship, which tends to emphasize the external

<sup>1</sup> According to Google Scholar (July 2017): Ansell and Gash, 2008; Agranoff and McGuire, 2004; Freeman, 1997; Bingham, Nabatchian and Rosemary O'Leary, 2005; McGuire, 2006; Emerson, Nabatchian and Balogh, 2012; Huxham et al., 2000; Newman et al., 2004; Cooper et al., 2006; Bingham and O'Leary, 2015; Sirianni, 2010; Camarinha-Matos and Afshar, 2008; Donahue et al., 2012. Kallis et al., 2009; Booher, 2004; Purdy, 2012; Ghose, 2005; Donahue, 2004; Buuren, 2009; Johnston et al., 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Selected from comprehensive list generated by combined EBSCO Service Delivery and Google Scholar searches (July 2017): Gugu and Dal Molin, 2016; Nohrstedt, 2016a; Albrecht, 2016; Spekkin et al., 2016; Jos, 2016; Oh and Bush, 2016; Kapucu et al., 2016; Smeets, 2017; Gash, 2017; Ulibarri et al., 2017; Bodin et al., 2017; Johnston, 2017; Nohrstedt, 2016b; Hsieh, 2016; Amsler (Bingham Blomgren), 2016; Kim and Darnall, 2016; Doberstein, 2016; Markovic, 2017; Torfing and Ansell, 2017; Evers et al., 2016. The search terms were collaborative governance and collaborative public management. The overlapping use of the collaborative policy-making and collaborative public management is noted by Kapucu, Yuldashev and Bakiev (2016) and Scott and Thomas (2016).

dimension of collaboration rather than internal (within government) cooperation. In contrast, the European scholarship, especially public administration scholarship, tends to subsume coordination among public bodies under the label of collaborative governance or closely related concepts such as integrated governance, interorganizational government, joined-up governance or collaborative public management (e.g., Lægreid et al., 2014; Verhoest and Bouckaert, 2005; McQuaid, 2010). However, the distinction should not be overstated: there is much North American and European cross-fertilization (see for instance Torfing and Ansell, 2017 and Ansell and Torfing, 2015); and many European scholars focus on the non-state participatory dimension (e.g., Bartoletti and Faccioli, 2016; Benedetto et al, 2016).

The differences among these influential definitions of collaborative governance indicate at least five dimensions along which the term can be conceptualised, ranging from narrower (restrictive) to broader, more diffused notions of collaboration.<sup>3</sup> The first of these taps into the public-private divide and essentially interrogates whether collaboration is primarily seen as bringing together governmental and non-governmental actors or, alternatively, this bridging function is not seen as essential or left unspecified. This dimension is also identified in scholarship on the roles public actors can play with respect to collaborative arrangements, as leaders, encouragers and followers (Koontz et al., 2004) or network brokers (Scott and Thomas, 2016). The second dimension concerns agency, that is, whether collaborative processes are seen to be initiated and/or controlled by public actors (typically government agencies). The third, closely related dimension is whether collaborative governance is conceptualised as a multi-organisational process, that is, whether it is restricted to organized interests (stakeholders that take an organizational form) and public bodies, or whether the notion also allows for broad public involvement of citizens.

The fourth dimension concerns the scope of collaboration with respect to durability (permanent versus task-oriented) and within the policy process, with some definitions assuming collaboration throughout a program or project, while others anticipate collaborative arrangements that are specific to for instance policy design, decision-making or service delivery. Finally, the last dimension taps into the normative assumptions (or their absence) behind collaborative governance. Some scholars leave the objective of collaboration open, while others assume or explicitly require that collaboration is undertaken with a public purpose. It is also common to assume that participants are driven by a constructive, problem-solving agenda. Much of the literature paints an idealized picture of the problem-solving and legitimacy-enhancing qualities of participatory and collaborative practices, while scholarship pointing to the potential abuses of these practices is relatively rare. Similarly, while there is some acknowledgement of the potential adverse effects of collaborative arrangements (e.g., Kallis et al, 2009; Kester, 2011; Purdy, 2012; Hileman and Bodin, 2019), both policy writing and the academic literature tend to presume that a transformation towards collaborative governance is ‘genuinely’ desired by policy-makers.

Thus, a narrow definition of collaborative governance implies processes and actions driven by government (agencies) that involve non-governmental organisations in a specific stage of the policy-process with the aim of achieving a pre-determined public policy objective – where each of these categories are filled with substantive content. In contrast, more diffuse notions of collaborative governance leave open one or more of the following: the range of actors, the driver/initiator of the process, the type of the participants and/or the precise aim of the exercise, and amount to little more than a general sense that multiple actors come together for some sort of common action. For instance, a recent article (which is not part of our corpus) justifies treating civic festivals as an ‘exceptional laboratory for the study of collaborative governance because these events are ubiquitous and are characterized by public and private partners engaged in joint activity’ (Sandro and Krane, 2018: 185). Clearly, this fuzziness is not conducive for the operationalization of collaborative governance for research or practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Beyond these conceptual dimensions derived from the most cited definitions, any specific collaborative governance arrangement can of course be analyzed in other dimensions, such as depth and task portfolio (e.g., Boston and Gill, 2011), use and integration of instruments, participant structure (e.g., Askim et al, 2011).

## TRENDS AND PATTERNS IN ACADEMIC WRITING ON COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to extend our observations based on a qualitative analysis of the most influential articles, we proceed to a systematic literature review. As Bryman (2008) argues, the increasing popularity of systematic literature reviews reflects criticism towards traditional literature reviews as being characterized by random selection, bias and responding to the presumed requirements of evidence-based policy-making processes (Bryman, 2008; Tranfield et al, 2003; Miller, 2004).

There is an increasing number of toolboxes available for systematic literature reviews. We followed Calvert (2015) in using EBSCO Discovery Service, which provides a single-window search function across multiple data base sources and for which we could secure institutional technical support. We searched for the terms ‘collaborative governance’ and ‘collaborative public management’, which led to 1,620 hits in peer-reviewed journals, the earliest from 1979 and up until the first half of 2017. After an automatic filtering and manual cleaning of duplicates and some non-English sources, 704 articles remained. Together they form a word corpus of 141,449 words and 12,780 unique word forms. While the dataset over-represents more recent work (articles published in 2016 and the first half of 2017 represented 21% of the total corpus) – given that digitalized text is more common for later years – it does show the increasing uptake of the concept and that it appears to have become generally recognized only from the mid-1990s.

The articles were first categorized into type of journal and geographical focus, if any.

The corpus of articles confirmed that the concept appears across a diverse set of journals in public administration, public policy and political science, which constituted nearly half of the abstracts. In addition, the term appears with a high frequency in environmental policy journals – over a quarter in our sample – but the concept has also been applied to diverse policy areas from sports management to health (Shillbury et al., 2016; Bretas and Shimizu, 2017). Based on the title and abstract, an empirical study taking place in a specific continent could be detected in 393 of the articles. Out of these, 37% dealt with North America and 28% with Europe. This is not unexpected, since, in absolute terms, the number of researchers publishing work in English-language journals in related disciplines is higher in the EU, USA and Canada than other regions of the world and scholars tend to choose case studies they are familiar with. Asia was the site of investigation for 17% of the articles, Australasia for 10%, while only 4% each for Africa and South America.

The following step was to use the corpus to check whether the type of words that appeared in the abstracts had changed over time, by dividing those written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century into three five-year-periods and ‘most recent’ documents (the 1.5 years preceding the data collection.) While the core words were similar, distinctive words appeared for each of the time periods compared to the rest of the corpus, which partly shows what concerned public debates in those times (Table 1). For instance, in 2001–2005, ‘Iraq’ ‘war’ and ‘reconstruction’ were distinctive words clearly reflecting world and Middle East politics at the time, whereas ‘risk’ is a distinctive word of the most recent period, as is ‘collaboration’ itself (which was not searched for in the corpus formation). In other words, a limited number of mayor themes in the academic study of collaborative governance appear to take shape and to assume importance in the field.

**Tab. 1:** Evolution of covered themes over time

Period	Distinctive words (compared to the rest)
2001–2005	subgroups (6), reconstruction (12), bond (6), Iraq (10), war (6)
2006–2010	nursing (11), nurses (11), collaboration (44), chain (8), antecedent (8)
2011–2015	collaboration (137), branding (28), tour (21), model (76), rights (75)
2016–2017	collaboration (100), indigenous (24), flood (53), pasture (10), risk (47)

Significantly, neither the qualitative analysis of the most cited nor the quantitative content analysis showed the prominence of analysing the importance of new technologies for collaborative governance, despite the fact that there is extensive and growing literature on how e-participatory tools can be used to let citizens impact policy design (although that literature has been criticised

for a ‘lack of comprehensive theoretical contributions, insufficient depth, and inconsistency in definitions of central concepts’; Susha and Grönlund, 2012:373). There is also literature on the role of ICT in co-production between citizens and government of public services, for instance in health care (e.g., Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2016) and on the streamlining of governmental ICT systems across policy sectors, with the difficulties to achieve that recognized already in the 1990s (e.g., Bellamy and Taylor, 1994). However, these insights have left a surprisingly small mark on the collaborative governance literature.

## COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IN POLICY DOCUMENTS

In order to go beyond academic work, we also sought to illustrate policy thinking on collaborative governance outside, or alongside, traditional academic institutions, in order to consider whether and to what extent the scholarly and the practitioner-oriented literature overlap or differ in orientation and subjects covered. We focused on material produced by government and independent (research) organizations (mainly think tanks or NGOs). Vast amounts of such material are produced in any country, which probably explains why this ‘grey literature’ remains outside the purview of traditional literature surveys: the amount of potential sources is simply overwhelming. To at least partially overcome this problem and in order to get a sense of the availability and scope of grey literature, academic public administration expert teams in ten EU countries were asked to provide a sample of sources that the teams considered as important policy documents dealing with collaborative governance in their own countries. The teams were a part of the multi-year research project (TROPICO – Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments).<sup>4</sup>

The ten countries - Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and the UK - represent a deliberately heterogeneous pool: they vary in terms of public administration traditions, state structure, recent political history, government composition and a wide range of other variables that may have a bearing on collaborative practices. This means that the pool of documents allows for a preliminary indication of how collaborative governance is approached by government officials and other practitioners in the EU countries, even if the 154 documents that were collected in this way were not representative of all possible policy documents pertaining to collaborative governance in a statistical sense. Most of the 154 documents were produced or commissioned by governments (86); and more documents dealt with external or a mixture of external/internal arrangements (125) than with internal collaboration (collaboration within government) (29). We note that the selection of documents reflects expert judgement and while we acknowledge the usual risks in using such material (including the possibility of the material being unrepresentative or incomplete because of known or unconscious bias), the exercise was informative about a wide range of subjects in policy documents that until now scholarly analyses remained blind to.

To give a flavour of the pool of documents, a Danish and a German example can serve to illustrate a government-produced document focusing on internal collaboration and a document produced outside government focusing on external collaboration, respectively. The Danish government stands behind ‘*Sammenhangsreform: Borgeren først - en mere sammenhængende offentlig sektor*’ (Cohesion reform: The Citizen first – a more cohesive public sector), a 28-page brochure from 2017 outlining the government’s plan to create a program for creating coherence and collaboration in public policy design and delivery. The document emphasizes the need for ‘less silo thinking and more cohesion in the public sector’ and that ‘in a complex public sector, there are no simple solutions to complex problems <...> better cohesion in the public sector demands broad inter-sectoral collaboration’ (Government of Denmark 2017: 4 and 23, our translation). The Generali Future Fund is an initiative of the German branch of the Italian-owned insurance giant Generali. The 80-page report *Generali Engagementatlas 2015 Rolle und Perspektiven Engagement unterstützender Einrichtungen in Deutschland* (Generali Engagement Atlas 2015: Roles and Perspectives of Engagement supported Initiatives in Germany) aims to ‘provide a starting point for discussion based on solid empirical ground’ and posits that ‘A capable and rich public life can only be organized through joint efforts by all relevant actors. Such joint efforts need focal points, creators of networks, coordinators and moderators’ (Generali Future Fund 2015: 4).

A qualitative analysis of the documents reveals that there are clear links between research and policy. Work by public administration, public policy and political science scholars over the past decades seems to have informed the policy documents, although the influence is not always direct (i.e., academic publications read by the author of the report), but filtered down through layers within and between

<sup>4</sup> We thank all contributors listed on the project website; <http://tropico-project.eu/team/>.



countries. For instance, the Generali Future Fund report mentioned refers to the work by sociologist Helmut Anheier and another German think tank report makes use of Sherry Arnstein's (1969) classic 'ladder of citizen participation' (Brocke and Karsten, 2007). An Estonian report on Open Government produced for the OECD contains reference to work by March and Olsen (1983) in the section on whole-of-government. Public administration scholars Lægveid and Rykkja are referred to in Norwegian policy texts (e.g., Direktoratet for forvaltning og IKT, 2016).

Collaborative governance as such is not a dominant term in policy writing, but it generally appears in the context of networked governance, steering, or coordination, although often these terms are not clearly defined. The reviewed documents say relatively little about causal processes and specific factors that have a bearing on collaboration. Instead, the texts are often at quite high level of abstraction and emphasize general 'needs' to cooperate, come together, engage citizens and so on. However, some variety in terms of how government should be re-structured, or how current structures (organizational units) should be used to enhance collaboration can be detected. Structures/institutions mentioned as important to establish or further develop include partnerships and networks; working groups; councils and secretariats; forums; and investment pools, all to some extent covered in the academic literature.

Government and think tank reports show more interest in intertwining the concepts of collaborative government and e-governance than the academic literature. Indeed, among policy-makers and other practitioners, the introduction of new ICT technologies is a key focus for the dynamics of collaborative arrangements – to the extent that the introduction of new e-government services or digital information sharing and co-working platforms and the ensuing new needs for cooperation among government agencies and non-governmental actors is a primary driver for thinking about collaboration methods. For instance, a German document discusses how 'with the help of on-line petitions, the democratic participation of citizens is strengthened' and how new formats like 'hackathons' can lead to software products of use for democracy, while this also entails challenges like 'protection of minors, or the support of senior citizens' (Germany 2016, Strategy for Engagement Politics at the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth). The different functions of digitalisation for coordination is emphasized in the Norwegian policy documents, which see it as an external driver for public administration development. Through enabling the sharing of knowledge, it may also contribute to coordinating policy content to a higher degree than before (Direktoratet for forvaltning og IKT, 2017).

Notably, the reviewed documents rarely if ever include discussions of potentially negative aspects of collaborative governance, and in this, they parallel the academic literature where discussion of potential risks, distortions and manipulation of collaborative and participatory governance remain relatively scarce.

In sum, the grey literature points to the understandings of collaborative governance that largely overlap with academic writing, although often without precision. This is also to say that conceptual confusion is not limited to academia. Even within the same country context, multiple terms are often used for describing similar practices. Notably, external and internal collaborative governance is discussed both in conjunction and separately.

## NATIONAL CONNOTATIONS OF COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Having provided at least an indicative overview of the nature of the discussion of collaborative governance in policy documents, this article finally turns to national specificities of how the term is understood and conceptualised. The diversity of national connotations contributes to the fuzziness of the term and is hence important to unpack in order to understand how collaborative practices are 'translated' rather than transferred (as traditionally assumed in the policy transfer literature) from one country to another (Stone 2012; Clarke et al 2015; Author 2018). Reviews of the collaborative governance literature have tended to treat English as a neutral medium even when undertaking comparative analysis; yet this assumption seems ill-justified given that many European languages do not even have direct equivalents for the term. Many of the English-language connotations of 'collaborative governance' are simply lost when used in non-English speaking countries – or more precisely, they are replaced by other, nationally specific connotations that are structured by culture, history and politics.

In order to gain an insight into the national connotations of collaborative governance, the academic public administration expert teams who also selected policy documents were asked to provide a translation of the term in their own languages (explaining whether the translation was literal or not) as well as any related terms; assess how the term is used by academics, policy makers and the broader public, and finally, whether the term carries any negative and/or positive association. Our findings indicate that few European languages have a direct and close (literal) translation, or partial translation, of collaborative governance, with some exceptions: the

Spanish *gobernanza colaborativa* is an example of a direct translation (relying on the common Latin origins of the world) and the German *kollaborative Governance* an example of a ‘semi-translation’ where part of the original expression is kept. Phrasing based on derivations of ‘cooperation’ are also fairly close, such as the Danish *samarbejdende styring* or Norwegian *samstyring* even though it should be noted that ‘governance’ itself is notoriously difficult to translate into many European languages without conflating it with ‘government’.

A range of other terms are in use to denote interactive behaviour taking place with other governmental actors and with actors outside the governmental sector, be they citizens, organised groups or private sector actors. Starting with German, *Governance*, *Kooperation*, *Kooperative Verwaltung* or *Zusammenarbeit (in Netzwerken)* are used and for collaboration with civil society or citizens *partizipative Governance* or *Beteiligung*. In the Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium *network management* and *managen van samenwerking* are the most frequently employed terms. Another term is *transversale samenwerking* (transversal governance).

With the exception of transversal governance, similar variations of terms dominate in Scandinavia, with an emphasis on derivations from ‘cooperation’ and ‘networks’. For instance, the Danish *samarbejdende styring* mentioned above is very rarely used, if ever, to describe the phenomenon. Instead, there are Danish terms that are fairly close to the term collaborative governance such as *netværksstyring* (network governance), *samskabelse* (co-production) and *samarbejdsdrevet innovation* (collaborative innovation). As demonstrated by the example cited earlier, *Sammenhængsreform* (cohesive government reform) has been in vogue. Similar Norwegian terms are *samstyring*, *nettverksstyring*, *samordning*, *samvirke*, *samhandling* and *samarbeid* – with perhaps the difference of Danish having another term for co-production (*samskabelse*) whereas Norwegian has *samordning* as a word close to ‘coordination’.

In the countries above, the use of terms partly overlaps with similar terms in English (in the UK), where ‘partnership’ and ‘network governance’ also capture cooperative behaviour in and by government. On the other hand, some languages seem not to have adopted collaborative governance as such. Although a literal translation would be fully possible to construct in French (*gouvernance collaborative*), this is not in use and the closest equivalent may be *gouvernement ouvert* (open government) or *transversalisation*, which may explain that this is also the term used in Belgium. In Estonia, *ühitne valitsemine* (united or ‘whole-of’ governance) is the preferred term, whereas the Hungarian term *együttműködő kormányzás* (cooperative governing) can mostly be found in documents originating with the European institutions that have been directly translated.

Collaborative governance and related terms are generally viewed as positive in the countries under examination. However, this finding comes with a few qualifications. In countries where the term collaborative governance is not generally used, a literal translation (for instance in EU documents) may cause different reactions. It may be perceived as neutral and thus fail to convey the positive image intended by the original document. In Estonia, where ‘united governance’ is preferred, the terms ‘collaboration’ and ‘governance’ are both common but used separately. Collaboration has a clearly positive meaning, whereas governance is neutral. It may signal something ‘new’ or ‘progressive’. The Spanish *gobernanza colaborativa* is perceived as relatively new and generally viewed positively, although rarely used by the general public. The Hungarian *együttműködő kormányzás* seems to be a foreign transplant, since it can only be found in some documents that have been translated from EU sources, or which have heavy EU influence, such as in documents about e-governance.

Collaborative governance can also be associated with a new era. In Denmark, *samarbejde* (cooperation or collaboration) has always had a positive value given that institutionalized dialogue and cooperation between state and various interest groups and civil society has historically been a strong norm. However, there has been increasing concern about collaboration being eroded in the public sector due to New Public management reforms and collaborative governance would therefore be discussed as a remedy.

Two examples of potentially more negative associations are worth highlighting. First, in some languages, collaboration has a negative connotation due to it being associated with siding with the enemy during the world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or with an oppressor in communist countries. In some Scandinavian languages, the literal word ‘collaborator’ would be reserved for this type of (negative) behaviour, whereas the various nouns and verbs derived from ‘cooperate’ would be positively seen. Second, even though ‘cooperation’ is widely seen as positive, it can also take on more specific, partisan meanings linking it to certain political ideologies and/or parties. In Hungary, ‘national cooperation/collaboration’ (*nemzeti együttműködés*) has been used prominently by Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his government (in power since 2010), in reference to the (purported) unity of the political community behind its leader. Whether this is seen as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ would, in the current polarized Hungarian political landscape, depend on political party preferences and approval or disapproval of the government.

## DISCUSSION: THE PERILS AND POTENTIALS OF A FUZZY CONCEPT

In this section, we bring together the findings from the different types of documents analysed above. First, our analysis of the most influential academic sources demonstrated that the term is used to describe practices that differ in terms of five key dimensions: participation (inside and/or outside government); agency (who drives these processes); inclusiveness (organizational and/or citizen participation); scope (time frame and stage of policy cycle); and normative assumptions (positive or neutral). This indicates that collaborative governance studies are indeed a broad church: activities from coordination among organisations to achieve a specific public management objective to wide involvement by societal actors in the policy-process broadly can all be subsumed under the concept.

Second, the systematic literature review performed on a wider pool of academic work, based on a database of article abstracts, indicated that collaborative governance tends to be discussed in the context of public management and that even though the most widespread field of application is environmental policy, it is researched across a wide range of sectors including sports and culture. It also confirmed that the uptake of the concept has picked up markedly since the mid-1990s and that the literature seems to coalesce around distinct themes that evolve in response to trends and developments in the field.

Third, the grey literature (policy documents produced by governments and institutions providing advice to governments) seems to have developed in parallel with scholarship: it rarely taps into the academic literature directly, but it is informed by it and practitioners' perspectives on collaborative governance do not differ markedly from those employed in academic analysis. At the same time, digital means/ICT appeared to be more prominent in the grey literature than in the academic literature.

Finally, our analysis showed how the concept's application gets further blurred when used in differing country contexts, in languages that sometimes have long-rooted terms that are (more) frequently used and sometimes have imported the concept of collaborative governance only in abstract, in the sense that it remains outside everyday public and policy discourses. Collaborative governance is also understood through the prism of history and politics; which explains why in some countries, 'collaboration' may evoke negative emotions or rejection rather than the notion of a normatively positive new phenomenon.

Although our goal was not primarily to advance a (new) conceptualisation of collaborative governance, a close look at the available academic and grey literature suggests that the analytical capture of the term can be increased by researchers' taking explicit positions on five dimensions. First, on whether collaboration is intended to bridge the governmental and non-governmental sectors or, alternatively, the involvement of actors from the former is sufficient. Second, it is important to spell out what type of actor initiates and drives the process – for instance to distinguish lobbying by non-governmental actors from collaborative processes. Thirdly, collaboration can occur among organisations, but may also involve citizens – but the latter may be a rather different exercise. Fourth, it is illuminating to be specific about the durability of collaborative arrangements – whether they are tied to a concrete project or task or, alternatively, develop into a permanent relationship. Finally, we would suggest to bring the normative goal into the analysis rather than simply assume, as it tends to be the case, that government-driven collaborative arrangements are always 'positive' in terms of intention and/or outcome.

## CONCLUSION

While the heterogeneity of how collaborative governance is understood makes for a vibrant scholarly discourse, we would call for more rigour in order to increase the analytical traction of the term. Our modest recommendation is to use 'collaborative governance' in a way that is more precise in capturing a set of practices and only those practices. This can be achieved by spelling out the researchers' positions with respect to the five main analytical dimensions suggested earlier and by being aware of and taking into account the national connotations the term carries across political systems. We would especially emphasize the need to overcome the somewhat artificial distinction between perspectives that focus on how the government (public sector agency) involves non-governmental (external) actors in policy design and service delivery, and those that focus on how the government can make its own units talk to, and work with, each other. In fact, we would argue that collaborative governance in a demanding sense of including external actors may be dependent on well-functioning within-government (internal) collaboration. Indeed, we would advocate for further research with respect to the relationship between internal and external collaboration, for instance to indicate whether well-functioning collaborative



practices among government agencies are an essential pre-condition for reaching out to non-governmental partners or, alternatively, external collaboration can at times substitute for deficiencies within the governmental sector.

Moreover, there are promising avenues for future research regarding the reasons for, and effects of, the diversity uncovered in this paper. One direction would be to consider the politics of ‘naming’, whether from a critical, interpretative policy studies angle, focusing on meaning-making, or from a mainstream institutionalist perspective, where the main research questions could concern party ideology, the use of (references to) collaboration as legitimizing device, or as tools of manipulation and propaganda. Another avenue for further research would be to map the diffusion of the term ‘collaborative governance’ and ascertain whether the increasing uptake of the concept is thanks to its analytical purchase among scholars, its promotion by policy-makers and epistemic communities, or something else.

In conclusion, despite its popularity in both academic and practitioner circles, collaborative governance remains a fuzzy concept. This fuzziness may impact the real world of policy and politics, in the sense that policy-makers may be tempted to claim to have ‘collaborative governance’ arrangements in place without making actual efforts to genuinely involve outside expertise and stakeholders. In other words, unless ‘collaborative governance’ is used with precise parameters, it risks becoming a buzz-word or, worse, propaganda (see Batory and Svensson 2019).

This article sought to contribute to the consolidation and synthesis of scholarship on collaborative governance by expanding our knowledge of how the term is used inside and outside academia. The paper adds value to the existing reviews of the field in several respects: first, by conducting a systematic literature review in addition to a traditional literature review to identify key analytical dimensions in the most influential work and establish the properties of academic scholarship; second, by providing an exploratory analysis of policy documents hitherto outside the purview of researchers; and finally by considering the linguistic and cultural connotations that alter the meaning of the term when translated into new contexts in 10 EU/EFTA countries. A richer understanding of variations in the use of the concept will be useful for theory-building on collaborative governance mechanisms in different country contexts down the line and for policymakers to develop an awareness about the importance of policy discourses.

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